

## Durham Research Online

---

### Deposited in DRO:

24 October 2019

### Version of attached file:

Published Version

### Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

### Citation for published item:

Marmodoro, Anna (2018) 'Gregory of Nyssa on the Trinity (with focus on his Letter ad Ablabius).', in Exploring Gregory of Nyssa : philosophical, theological and historical studies. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 220-234.

### Further information on publisher's website:

<https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198826422.003.0012>

### Publisher's copyright statement:

Marmodoro, Anna (2018). Gregory of Nyssa on the Trinity (with focus on his Letter ad Ablabius). In Exploring Gregory of Nyssa: philosophical, theological and historical studies. Marmodoro, Anna McLynn, Neil Oxford: Oxford: Oxford University Press. 220-234 reproduced by permission of Oxford University Press  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198826422.003.0012>

### Additional information:

---

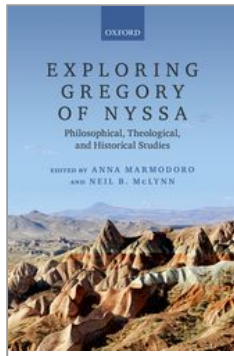
### Use policy

The full-text may be used and/or reproduced, and given to third parties in any format or medium, without prior permission or charge, for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes provided that:

- a full bibliographic reference is made to the original source
- a [link](#) is made to the metadata record in DRO
- the full-text is not changed in any way

The full-text must not be sold in any format or medium without the formal permission of the copyright holders.

Please consult the [full DRO policy](#) for further details.



## Exploring Gregory of Nyssa: Philosophical, Theological, and Historical Studies

Anna Marmodoro and Neil B. McLynn

Print publication date: 2018

Print ISBN-13: 9780198826422

Published to Oxford Scholarship Online: November 2018

DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780198826422.001.0001

# Gregory of Nyssa on the Metaphysics of the Trinity (with Reference to his Letter To Ablabius)

Anna Marmodoro

DOI:10.1093/oso/9780198826422.003.0012

## Abstract and Keywords

This chapter explores Gregory's metaphysics of the Trinity, which used an innovative distinction between *stuffs* (e.g. gold), which cannot be counted, and *individuals* (e.g. rings), which can. Gregory identifies the nature of any kind with the totality of its instances: the nature of man is the totality of men; the nature of gold is the totality of gold. For Gregory, the totality is more 'real' than the individuals into which it is articulated, which are merely the way in which the kind is present in the world. God is then identified as the total quantity of divinity in the world, and is thus *one*, and real. The Persons of the Trinity into which God is articulated are the ways God is in the world, and can be comprehended by us. Thus, the problem of the Trinity is solved as a special case of the philosophical problem of the One and Many.

**Keywords:** God, Trinity, stuff, individuals, count principles, principles of individuation

The metaphysical question that the doctrine of the Trinity in its most abstract formulation raises is this: how can one thing be many too?<sup>1</sup> Let us call it for brevity the *One and Many* problem. The Trinity is not its only instance. The conundrum was already prominent in philosophy before it became also of theological importance in early Christian thought. Given a number of elements, their composition into a whole generates another version of the same question: a whole is its parts; but isn't the whole one and its parts many? What is the relation between the parts and the whole they compose? At one extreme of the

spectrum of philosophical answers is the view that wholes are nothing over and above the sum of their parts; so, the whole is many (in the way in which e.g. a bundle of sticks is the sticks that compose it). On the other extreme of the spectrum is the view that a whole is one, because it has no actual parts, even if it is derived from the composition of parts: the component parts cease to exist as such in the whole (in the way in which eggs, butter, sugar etc. qua ingredients of a cake are not to be found as such in the cake). On the former view, the One and Many problem is solved by sacrificing the oneness of the whole, and on the latter by sacrificing the multiplicity of the parts.

There are also other versions of the One and Many problem in the philosophical literature; for instance the case of entities which are numerically one, and simple in nature, and yet bear properties which introduce complexity. Plato's Ideas are suchlike entities: each of them is *monoeides* (i.e. all there is to **(p.221)** its nature is the kind of character in the world the Idea stands for);<sup>2</sup> and yet Ideas bear further qualities (e.g. they are eternal). How can an Idea be a single kind, and also of many kinds, on account of the properties that belong to it? The problem was left open in Plato's metaphysics. A further version of the One and Many problem is generated by the issue of the instantiation of a universal; for example, the distribution of each of Plato's Ideas: there is an unique Idea for each kind of character in the world, and yet, the character recurs simultaneously in many individuals. Aristotle's forms are also one per type of character in the world, but each form is simultaneously present in many particulars.

The case of the Trinity is at least as challenging a version of One and Many problem as its precedents found in the history of classical (pagan) philosophy. What makes the case of the Trinity distinctive, and philosophically difficult to account for, is that Christian orthodoxy claims that there is a single God, without thereby wanting to deny the status of divine individuals to each of the Persons of the Trinity. Let us call this doctrinal stance (D) for brevity. (D) makes the problem of the Trinity different from pre-Christian versions of the One and Many problem, and in particular from the problem of the instantiation of universal, because the three person of the Trinity are all of the same ontological status, and are not differentiated into type and tokens. (D) also blocks a move that ancient and modern metaphysicians alike would find natural to make in accounting for the Trinity. The move in question would be to understand the relation between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit on the one hand, and God on the other, in terms of emergence. Aristotle had introduced emergence in the history of metaphysics in book XVII of his *Metaphysics*, with the example of a syllable and its constituent letters;<sup>3</sup> so we can plausibly assume that it would have been a metaphysical tool available to the thinkers of the Christian era. In very general terms, the idea is that composition can give rise to an emergent novel entity, with novel properties with respect to those of its constituents. The important and relevant feature of emergence with respect to the problem of the Trinity is that an emergent entity can be of the same type as the entities from

whose composition it emerges (as for instance in the case of a cube made of cubes). So, positing that the Trinity is an emergent entity would respect (D) insofar as the Trinity would have metaphysical novelty with respect to the **(p. 222)** three Persons, but would also be an entity of the same kind. The reason why thinking of the Trinity in terms of emergence is not however viable (on account of (D)) is that the components of an emergent entity lose their individuality and distinctness at the emergent level; this is the price to pay for the genuine metaphysical novelty of what emerges. But the divine Persons making up the Trinity cannot lose their status as individuals; they are three Persons. Therefore emergence cannot give us a model for understanding the metaphysics of the Trinity.

In this chapter I will examine an original account of the Trinity that displays much philosophical ingenuity in the effort of meeting (D)'s requirements. This is the account that the Church Father Gregory of Nyssa offers in his *Letter to Ablabius*.<sup>4</sup> I will argue that Gregory addresses the Trinity as a philosophical problem; to solve it, he draws eclectically on philosophical ideas developed by his pagan predecessors Plato and Aristotle, adding also original ideas of his own. The resulting account is innovative and, I submit, sound, in the sense that it justifies both the oneness and the threeness of God.

#### Gregory of Nyssa's Metaphysical Account of the Trinity

Gregory's *Letter to Ablabius* is a dialectical piece, aimed to rebut non-orthodox views on the Trinity.<sup>5</sup> Such erroneous views are, on the one hand, that there are three Gods, and on the other, that not all of the Persons are God. Gregory writes that,

we are at first sight compelled to accept one or other of two erroneous opinions, and either to say there are three Gods, which is unlawful, or not to acknowledge the Godhead of the Son and the Holy Spirit, which is impious and absurd.<sup>6</sup>

**(p.223)** Since, by doctrine, God is one, the divine status of the three Persons must not undermine the numerical oneness of God. Nor should the oneness of God undermine the divine status of each of the Three Persons. There is one God and each of the three Persons is God. In his *Letter to Ablabius* Gregory undertakes to give a philosophical account of this claim. His approach is to begin with an example from everyday life, of an entity that is one and many, where (like in the case of the Trinity) oneness and multiplicity do not 'interfere' with each other. The familiarity of the example Gregory offers should not mislead us into thinking that finding such an example is an easy matter. His example is that of a lump of gold which is cut into coins—from this example he will develop a novel and general metaphysical theory whose significance goes beyond the original theological problem of the Trinity. Let us turn to examine Gregory's treatment of the example:

For we say that *gold, even though it be cut into many figures, is one*, and is so spoken of; but we speak of many coins or many staters, without finding any multiplication of the nature of gold by the number of staters.<sup>7</sup>

One may well ask the question: gold is one *what*? With hindsight, and twentieth-century philosophical terminology, we can answer that the gold is one *quantity of matter*, and remains the same (quantity of matter) even if cut into coins.<sup>8</sup> The term 'quantity of matter' in the specific sense I am using it here was introduced by Helen Cartwright in the 1970s, to designate what is common for example between a golden ring and the earrings it may be moulded into: what is common is the quantity of gold involved. The important point for our purposes is that, as Cartwright observed,

'gold' [taken as an example of quantity of matter] does not provide an arithmetic for those things to which it applies and, trivially, neither does any other mass noun; 'one,' 'two,' 'how many...' are ruled out grammatically.<sup>9</sup>

Surprisingly, Gregory makes, explicitly, the same point. He does not use our terminology, but he has thoroughly grasped the concept of quantity of matter. He writes that,

for this reason we speak of gold, when it is contemplated in greater bulk, either in plate or in coin, as much, but we do not speak of it as many golds on account of the multitude of the material.<sup>10</sup>

**(p.224)** I submit that Gregory has identified 'gold' as a mass-term, referring to a mass that follows the arithmetic of quantities (and correspondingly is qualified as 'much' and 'less'). Generalizing from the example, what Gregory has discovered is that some entities are individuated as *masses* and some entities are individuated as *individuals*. The difference between them is that individuals come with a count principle, given by their sortal description, which allows one to count how many they are (e.g. so many books in a room). Masses, on the other hand, do not come with a count principle, and hence cannot be counted (accordingly we talk of some, much or little (e.g.) water in a glass). If, then, a quantity of gold is cut up into coins, this does not change its number. It can't, because count principles do not apply to masses. Gregory even gestures to linguistic considerations to show that it is not the quantity of gold that becomes many, but the coins cut out from it. He writes that,

when one says there are many gold pieces (Darics, for instance, or staters), [...] it is not the material, but the pieces of money to which the significance of number applies: indeed, properly, we should not call them gold but golden.<sup>11</sup>

Darics or staters are individuated as (golden) coins; they are not quantities of gold, which is why the number that accrues to them, qua coins, does not accrue to the quantity of gold out of which they are made. Gregory uses this observation about individuation to develop a theory about the natures of things. It is plausible to think that in making this conceptual transition, from *quantity* of (e.g.) gold, to the *nature* of golden items, Gregory is leaning on a passage in Plato's *Timaeus*. There Plato writes,

Suppose you were moulding gold into every shape there is, going on non-stop remoulding one shape into the next. If someone then were to point at one of them and ask you, 'What is it?' then, your safest answer by far, with respect to truth, would be to say, 'gold,' but never 'triangle' or any of the other shapes which come to be in the gold, as though it is these, because they change even while you're making the statement.<sup>12</sup>

**(p.225)** Plato's argument is this: since the material an object is made of survives the object's changes (of shape, and function we can add), it is the material that reveals the nature of the object, namely what each of these things of different shapes and functions is. Thus, in the example gold is the nature that stays the same, while the shapes (and functions) it takes on are transient and ephemeral.<sup>13</sup> Plato proceeds to offer an explanation for why gold is what survives, and thus is the nature of the golden things in question. He writes,

Now the same account, in fact, holds also for that nature<sup>14</sup> which receives all the bodies. We must always refer to it by the same term, for it does not depart from its own character in any way. Not only does it always receive all things, *it has never in any way whatever taken on any characteristic* similar to any of the things that enter it. These are the things that make it appear different at different times.<sup>15</sup>

We now see that there is a reason why gold survives transformations. A quantity of gold is not circular; while a ring is—as Helen Cartwright observes in the passage quoted above. But what a ring really is, is gold; and thus gold is the real subject of properties such as being circular. As a subject however, gold bears such properties; but it is not changed by them. This is an important metaphysical distinction Plato draws (but does not articulate) in the *Timaeus*, between different ways properties may belong to something.<sup>16</sup> So, on account of the fact that properties such as shape belong to the golden object and to gold differently, gold survives unchanged through acquiring and losing (e.g.) certain shapes; it is only the object made out of gold that changes. This is the key to understanding why gold, in Plato's and in Gregory's examples, is the nature of (golden) things: it is because gold survives through the changes affecting golden things.<sup>17</sup>

To recapitulate my argument so far: the important idea that Gregory derives from Plato's *Timaeus* is that a certain quantity of gold—this gold—is both *qualitatively one* (it is gold) and *numerically one* (it remains the same quantity **(p.226)** of gold throughout transformations). Gregory's argument for this (Platonic) position, as we will see, is new and not to be found in Plato; it complements Plato's stance in two ways: with the distinction between masses and individuals and the insight that properties belong to a mass and to an individual differently; and with the idea that a different arithmetic applies to masses (i.e. natures, like gold) and individuals (e.g. coins). The result is a distinctive contribution of Gregory's to the history of metaphysics. Now, what is most relevant to our present concerns is that mass-arithmetic applies to masses (e.g. much gold), and count-arithmetic to individuals (e.g. many golden coins). The plurality of the artefacts that are generated by, e.g., the coin-shape does not 'transfer' to the quantity of gold the artefacts are made from. That is, the articulation and the reshaping into artefacts leaves the original quantity of gold unaffected. Gregory is explicit about this point, and states it repeatedly in the last quotation above. On this insight Gregory will build his account of the Trinity.

So far I have been arguing for a very significant connection between Plato's views in the *Timaeus* and Gregory's thought. But as I anticipated in the introduction to this chapter, Gregory, aware of the fact that the Trinity is a distinctive case of what I called the One and Many problem, doesn't follow completely either Plato or Aristotle in addressing it, but develops his own theory, using elements from both his predecessors as well as original ideas of his own. One key notion the three philosophers share is that there are joints at which nature is to be carved; such joints of nature are the real being of things. But which are these? We saw that for Plato (at least in the *Timaeus*) that of the *quantities of matter* is the level at which we find nature's joints, or real being. For, a quantity of matter, such as this gold, survives unaffected articulation and reshaping, e.g. into many coins. This for Plato reveals that the nature of an object—what the object really is—is its matter, i.e. gold. Aristotle on the other hand, uses the (same, Platonic) criterion of survival through change to identify (by contrast with Plato) the *form* of an object as its nature and principle of individuation, where the form, or essence of something, is the set of its surviving qualities or features. So real being for Aristotle is at the level of *quality*. Gregory combines ideas from Plato and Aristotle; for him, *quantities of quality* are the nature's joints, or the real being of things.<sup>18</sup>

**(p.227)** Furthermore, like Aristotle, Gregory posits two principles of individuation in his metaphysics. Aristotle's two principles pick out, respectively, concrete particulars (e.g. Socrates), and their substantial form, or the form of the species (e.g. the form of man). Aristotle appears in his writings to have remained somewhat divided on which of the two principles yields 'more real' being.<sup>19</sup> Gregory too posits two individuation principles, one for the natures of things (e.g. gold), and one for individuals (e.g. coins) which are individuated by

what he calls their 'peculiar qualities'; with a different example, Gregory explains that,

the persons admits of that separation which is made by the peculiar attributes considered in each severally, and when they are combined [that separation] is presented to us by means of number [...]<sup>20</sup>

As we saw, natures come with no count principles, whilst individuals do have count principles and their own arithmetic. But what is important for present purposes is that (unlike Aristotle's) Gregory's individuation criteria are not of the same standing with each other. The one that picks out natures, thereby picks out *real being*, the joints of reality we could say; whilst the latter picks out *ways we get to know natures*, in terms of individuals with their peculiar qualities.<sup>21</sup>

Gregory takes a further step, which follows from Plato's position in the *Timaeus*, but which Plato, or his followers, never explicitly took. Gregory thinks that each individual concrete thing has a nature and is its nature, for example 'Luke is a man', where the 'is' expresses essential predication (and not identity).<sup>22</sup> But he further extends the Platonic conception of natures of concrete individual things as quantities to *all things*. For him, even the nature of man qua species is a quantity of quality (i.e. humanity). So, not only the concrete individuals (like Peter and Luke, or the golden coins), but also the species (like man) are quantities of quality:<sup>23</sup>

**(p.228)**

As, then, the golden staters are many, but the gold is one, so too those who are exhibited to us severally in the nature of man, as Peter, James, and John, are many, yet the man in them is one.<sup>24</sup>

Gregory develops the notion of the nature of man as quantity of humanity as follows. First, he states that the nature of man is common to the individual men, thus:

there are many who have shared in the nature [of man]—many disciples, say, or apostles, or martyrs—but the man in them all is one; since, as has been said, the term man does not belong to the nature of the individual as such, but to that which is common.<sup>25</sup>

Gregory's claim, when saying that 'the man in them all is one', is that the nature of man in Luke is the same quantity of quality as the nature of man in Stephen, Mark, etc.<sup>26</sup> There is an explicit indication in the text that Gregory is **(p.229)** thinking of quantities, in the case of what is common among golden coins as well as among men. He writes that '...their [the individuals'] nature is one, [...] not capable of increase by addition or of diminution by subtraction'.<sup>27</sup> Gregory identifies this feature of natures, namely that they cannot increase or decrease—



they remain unchanged in their quantity; and uses it to justify why the mass-arithmetic of a quantity of (e.g.) gold is different from the count-arithmetic of (e.g.) the coins into which it is cut. The point Gregory had already made earlier in the Letter is that the quantity (and oneness) of gold in the world is independent of the articulation of that quantity into any number of golden coins. Similarly, the nature of man remains one independently of the number of men that participate in it:

according to true reasoning neither diminution nor increase attaches to any nature, when it is contemplated in a larger or smaller number. For it is only those things which are contemplated in their individual circumscription which are enumerated by way of addition. Now this circumscription is noted by bodily appearance, and size, and place, and difference in figure and colour [i.e. their peculiar qualities], and that which is contemplated apart from these conditions is free from the circumscription which is formed by such categories.<sup>28</sup>

What is contemplated apart from the articulation that individuates particulars is the *total quantity* of a certain quality. This is why such quantity is incapable of increase or diminution. Gregory continues with a direct comparison between the case of man and the case of gold; as we saw in a passage already quoted:

As, then, the golden staters are many, but the gold is one, so too those who are exhibited to us severally in the nature of man, as Peter, James, and John, are many, yet the man in them is one.<sup>29</sup>

**(p.230)** The nature of man is the total quantity of humanity in the world, just as the nature of gold is the total quantity of gold in the world.<sup>30</sup> The nature of man is in all men in the way that the quantity of gold in the world is in all the golden artefacts there are. This is why Gregory claims that the term 'man' does not describe the nature of an individual man, but only the nature of the man that is common to all men:

the man in them all is one; since, as has been said, the term man does not belong to the nature of the individual as such, but to that which is common.<sup>31</sup>

Generalizing, *the nature of each kind of thing there is, is the total quantity of that kind*. We can now understand the following remarks Gregory makes, in relation to both gold and man:

their nature is one, at union in itself, and an absolutely indivisible unit, [...] but in essence being and continually remaining one, inseparable even though it appear in plurality, continuous, complete, and not divided with the individuals who participate in it.<sup>32</sup>

Importantly, this is a description of the nature of man, but it also applies to the total quantity of gold and to the total quantity of any kind. The nature of man is, metaphysically, a quantity of quality, just like the nature of gold is the total quantity of it. It appears to be 'separated' into many individuals, namely the actual members of a species or a kind in nature; but it is in fact a 'continuous' quantity, and 'complete' as the total quantity of the corresponding kind.<sup>33</sup> **(p. 231)** A natural way for us, metaphysicians of the twenty-first century, to conceptualize how Gregory thinks of the quantities of species and kinds, is as mereological fusions of the individuals in nature that belong to these species or kinds. W. V. O. Quine developed a conception of properties which might be thought comparable to how Gregory thinks of natures (although Quine did *not* apply it to terms with count principles like man). Quine writes that 'the mass substantive "red" in subject position [i.e. referring to the property of red] may be conceived as a singular term naming the scattered totality of red substance'.<sup>34</sup> This scattered totality of red substance is a single distributed object, the property or nature of red, made up of all the objects in the world which are red. In Gregory's example, the distributed object is the nature of man, made up by all the men in the world, each of whom is human, just as gold is a distributed object made up of all the golden coins there are. (It is important to note that the fusion of men is not a conception of the nature of man that would deliver a sortal concept for the individuation of men. Gregory's conception of the fusion of men, like the fusion of red in Quine, captures the presence of a kind of condition in nature, in Gregory's case, humanity. Yet, Gregory assumes that men are individuated as instances of a sortal, without telling us more.<sup>35</sup>)

Coming now to how Gregory applies the metaphysics he developed in the case of the nature of man to the Trinity, he writes that,

The Lord God is one Lord, even though the name of Godhead extends through the Holy Trinity. This I say according to the account we have given in the case of human nature, in which we have learned that it is improper to extend the name of the nature by the mark of plurality.<sup>36</sup>

The nature of man is one, even if the name 'man' extends through humanity. What we have learned in the case of the nature of man is that it is improper to extend the name of 'man' by pluralizing the name, because human nature is one, and its plurality isn't more real than the plurality of the nature of gold in the golden coins. The nature of gold is the total quantity of gold in the world; the nature of man is the total quantity of humanity in the world; both as we saw are conceived as what we would call mereological fusions: the fusion of all golden objects in the world, and the fusion of all men, respectively. It follows that the nature of God is the total quantity of the divine, that is, all the Gods there are. Accordingly, it is as improper to extend the name 'Godhead' in the **(p.232)**

plural ('Gods') to the Persons of the Trinity, as it is to extend the name 'man' in the plural ('men') to Luke, Mark, etc. Gregory writes that,

the word 'God' it [i.e. the Scripture] employs studiously in the singular form only, guarding against introducing the idea of different natures in the Divine essence by the plural signification of Gods.<sup>37</sup>

The Trinity is the single nature of the divine: God. The articulation into Persons as it is presented to our comprehension is based on the peculiar properties that characterize this single nature in relation to its causal origins:

one is the Cause, and another is of the Cause; and again in that which is of the Cause we recognize another distinction. For one is directly from the first Cause, and another by that which is directly from the first Cause; so that the attribute of being Only-begotten abides without doubt in the Son, and the interposition of the Son, while it guards His attribute of being Only-begotten, does not shut out the Spirit from His relation by way of nature to the Father.<sup>38</sup>

So, the difference in the causal origins between the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit introduces articulation in the nature of the divine, and allows our apprehension of God. Such articulation of God into three Persons isn't however more real, according to Gregory, than the division of the human nature into individual people and the division of gold into coins. He writes that,

Thus, since on the one hand the idea of cause differentiates [as a peculiar quality] the Persons of the Holy Trinity [...] and since on the one hand the Divine nature is apprehended by every conception as unchangeable and undivided, for these reasons we properly declare the Godhead to be one, and God to be one, and employ in the singular all other names which express Divine attributes.<sup>39</sup>

There is therefore a single God, whose peculiar qualities articulate Him into three Persons in our apprehension. It remains now to address the question: why three Persons exactly? Gregory offers a justification for this number, when saying that:

**(p.233)**

every operation which extends from God to the Creation [...] has its origin from the Father, and proceeds through the Son, and is perfected in the Holy Spirit.<sup>40</sup>

Even if we are not given a detailed account of each of the three Persons' distinctive operation (and of the connection between his peculiar properties and the operation that each is assigned), it is clear that the three operations are

different ('issuing', 'bringing into operation', and 'perfecting'),<sup>41</sup> but complementary and equally necessary for divine action.<sup>42</sup> Gregory writes that,

the action of each concerning anything is not separate and peculiar, but whatever comes to pass, in reference either to the acts of His providence for us, or to the government and constitution of the universe, comes to pass by the action of the Three, yet what does come to pass is not three things.<sup>43</sup>

### **(p.234) Conclusion**

In his *Letter to Ablabius* Gregory of Nyssa approaches the doctrine of the Trinity as a variant of a problem that has engaged philosophers since antiquity: how can something be one *and* many? He looks back at the metaphysical solutions that his predecessors Plato and Aristotle had put forward, but he does not lean entirely on any of them. Rather, he correctly identifies what makes the Trinity a distinctive version of the One and Many problem, and develops an original solution for it, combining elements of Plato's and Aristotle's metaphysics. Gregory knows, from Plato's and Aristotle's metaphysics, that a universal (i.e. the nature of a kind) is one, while the instances of that kind are many. But this type of arithmetic of instantiation can not be put to use to account for the Trinity problem, because universals are not, themselves, concrete individuals in the world; so if God were a universal of which the Persons were instances, He would not be a concrete individual, and further, his instances would not be of the same ontological status as His, contrary to the doctrine. Gregory needs to innovate. In addressing the question of the Trinity, he makes two important contributions to the history of metaphysics in general. One concerns the distinction between the arithmetic of stuffs and of individuals; and one concerns the identification of the nature of each type of thing in the world with the totality of the presence of the kind in the world, namely, its membership. Thus, the nature of man is the totality of men in the world; the nature of gold is the totality of golden artefacts in the world. Applied to the Trinity, this theory enables Gregory to hold that the nature of God is one, and it is the total quantity of what is divine in the world. What is divine in the world are the Persons of the Trinity, who are three in our apprehension only, from the perspective of their differentiation by the peculiar qualities. Nevertheless, what is real is the nature of the divine, God.

### Notes:

(<sup>1</sup>) Earlier versions of this chapter were presented at the Universities of Oxford and Princeton, and at the Union Theological Seminary at Columbia University. I am very grateful for the helpful comments received on all these occasions.

(<sup>2</sup>) See e.g. *Phaedo*, 78b–84b for mention of the Forms as *monoeides* (at 78d5, 80b2, and 83e2); the other occurrences are in the *Symposium* (211b1, 211e4); *Theaetetus* (205d1); *Timaeus* (59b2); and *Republic* (612a4).

(<sup>3</sup>) 'As regards that which is compounded out of something so that the whole is one—not like a heap, however, but like a syllable—the syllable is not its elements, *ba* is not the same as *b* and *a*...for when they are dissolved, the whole[s], i.e.... the syllable, no longer exists, but the elements of the syllable exist' (1041b11–15).

(<sup>4</sup>) My goal here is to explore the philosophical ideas in the letter, but not to give a full exegesis of it, or a comprehensive account of Gregory's views on the Trinity across all his writings.

(<sup>5</sup>) This letter is not very much discussed in the literature on Gregory of Nyssa; see among the most informative recent studies L. Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), ch. 14.

(<sup>6</sup>) *Ad Ablabium quod non sint Tres Dei*, ed. F. Mueller in *Gregorii Nysseni Opera*, III/1 (Leiden: Brill, 1958), 38.3–7 (PG 116–17); and elsewhere: ἀνάγκη [...] ἐνὶ πάντως τῶν ἀπεμφαινόντων συνενεχθῆναι κατὰ τὸν πρόχειρον νοῦν καὶ ἢ τρεῖς λέγειν θεούς, ὅπερ ἀθέμιτον, ἢ μὴ προσμαρτυρεῖν, τῷ υἱῷ καὶ τῷ πνεύματι τὴν θεότητα, ὅπερ ἀσεβές τε καὶ ἄτοπον. *Ad Ablabium* is cited according to page and line numbers.

(<sup>7</sup>) Ibid. 53.16–19 (PG 132); my emphasis ἐπεὶ καὶ τὸν χρυσὸν φαμεν, κἂν εἰς πολλοὺς διακερματίζεται τύπους, ἓνα καὶ εἶναι καὶ λέγεσθαι· πολλὰ δὲ νομίσματα καὶ πολλοὺς στατήρας ὀνομάζομεν, οὐδένα τῆς φύσεως ταῦ χρυσοῦ πλεονασμὸν ἐν τῷ πλήθει τῶν στατήρων εὐρίσκοντες.

(<sup>8</sup>) A quantity of matter remains the same if no matter is added to and subtracted from it; that its weight or amount doesn't change is not relevant.

(<sup>9</sup>) H. Cartwright, 'Quantities', *Philosophical Review* 79.1 (1970): 3.

(<sup>10</sup>) *Ad Ablabium*, 53.20–2, p. 132: διὸ καὶ πολὺς ὁ χρυσὸς λέγεται, ὅταν ἐν ὄγκῳ πλείονι ἢ σκεύεσιν ἢ νομίσμασι θεωρῇται, πολλοὶ δὲ οἱ χρυσοὶ διὰ τὸ πλῆθος τῆς ὕλης οὐκ ὀνομάζονται. Note that Gregory does not have the equivalent of our term 'quantity', but he does use the term 'bulk' instead, to refer to the quantity of gold.

(<sup>11</sup>) Ibid. 53.22–54.1, p. 132: τις οὕτω λέγοι, χρυσοὺς πολλοὺς, ὡς τοὺς δαρεικοὺς ἢ τοὺς στατήρας...οὐχ ἡ ὕλη ἀλλὰ τὰ κέρματα τὴν τοῦ πλῆθους σημασία ἐδέξατο. κυρίως γὰρ ἔστιν οὐχὶ χρυσοὺς ἀλλὰ χρυσέους τούτους εἰπεῖν...

(<sup>12</sup>) *Timaeus*, 50a5–b4: εἰ γὰρ πάντα τις σχήματα πλάσας ἐκ χρυσοῦ μηδὲν μεταπλάττων παύοιτο ἕκαστα εἰς ἅπαντα, δεικνύντος δὴ τινος αὐτῶν ἐν καὶ ἐρομένου τί ποτ' ἔστι, μακρῷ πρὸς ἀλήθειαν ἀσφαλέστατον εἰπεῖν ὅτι χρυσός, τὸ δὲ τρίγωνον ὅσα τε ἄλλα σχήματα ἐνεγίνετο, μηδέποτε λέγειν ταῦτα ὡς

ὄντα, ἃ γε μεταξύ τιθεμένου μεταπίπτει. In this passage Plato makes the distinction, which became subsequently mostly associated with Aristotle's metaphysics, between *being a this* versus *being such*. Plato takes gold to be a this. He associates being a this with the survival of a mass-kind in change (e.g. this gold), whilst Aristotle associates being a this with the survival of a count-kind in change (e.g. this man). Note that in the passage quoted above Plato claims that what the triangle really is, is gold; while Gregory would say that the triangle is golden, like the coins are golden rather than gold. This does not however amount to a divergence in their views on this point: one of Gregory's examples in the *Letter to Ablabius* is that John is human, but he has the nature of man. I won't examine the issue in further depth here, because a more detailed comparison between Plato's and Gregory's views would take us outside the scope of this chapter.

(<sup>13</sup>) It is interesting to note that for Plato at least in the *Timaeus*, the answer to the 'what is it?' question is *not* given by the organization or the function of an object, as Aristotle would have said, but by the material that constitutes the object.

(<sup>14</sup>) Here 'nature' refers to the receptacle, space, and what Aristotle in *Met.* VII 3 would argue matter as pure potentiality is.

(<sup>15</sup>) *Timaeus*, 50b5-c4, my emphasis. ὁ αὐτὸς δὲ λόγος καὶ περὶ τῆς τὰ πάντα δεχομένης σώματα φύσεως· ταῦτόν αὐτὴν ἀεὶ προσρητέον· ἐκ γὰρ τῆς αὐτῆς τὸ παράπαν οὐκ ἐξίσταται δυνάμεως· δέχεται τε γὰρ ἀεὶ τὰ πάντα, καὶ μορφήν οὐδεμίαν ποτὲ οὐδενὶ τῶν εἰσιόντων ὁμοίαν εἴληφεν οὐδαμῇ οὐδαμῶς... φαίνεται δὲ δι' ἐκεῖνα ἄλλοτε ἄλλοιον.

(<sup>16</sup>) Fleshing out this distinction on behalf of Plato would take us outside the scope of this chapter.

(<sup>17</sup>) The function that gold plays in Plato's and Gregory's accounts is that Aristotle's essence.

(<sup>18</sup>) There is another distinctive feature of Gregory's metaphysics that might be helpful to mention here: Gregory has no matter in his system; he uses the example of a quantity of matter like gold to illustrate his view, presumably because it is a more intuitive, easier to grasp way to present the point he wants to make, especially given the intended readership of the *Letter to Ablabius*. I offer an analysis of Gregory's views on matter, including a discussion of the recent literature, in 'Gregory of Nyssa on the Creation of the World', in *Causation and Creation in Late Antiquity*, ed. A. Marmodoro and B. Prince (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 94-111.

(<sup>19</sup>) For Aristotle (but not for Gregory) both individuation principles are sortal principles, carrying count principles with them. I cannot investigate here the relation between the two principles within Aristotle's metaphysics.

(<sup>20</sup>) *Ad Ablabium*, 40.24–41.2 (PG 120): ὁ μὲν τῶν ὑποστάσεων λόγος διὰ τὰς ἐνθεωρουμένας ιδιότητας ἐκάστῳ τὸν διαμερισμὸν ἐπιδέχεται καὶ κατὰ σύνθεσιν ἐν ἀριθμῷ θεωρεῖται.

(<sup>21</sup>) The expression 'presented to us' indicates that their multitude is something of an appearance, or, more carefully said, not as real as their nature. There is an echo here of Plato's claim that we should not call "triangle" or any of the other shapes which come to be in the gold, as though it is these [i.e. as though they had existence], because they change even while you're making the statement' (50b2–4).

(<sup>22</sup>) Gregory grasps perfectly the distinction between the two uses of the verb to be, for essential predication and identity respectively; passages like the following one make it clear: 'Luke is a man, or Stephen is a man; but it does not follow that if any one is a man he is therefore Luke or Stephen' (*Ad Ablabium*, 40.21–3 (PG 120)).

(<sup>23</sup>) Furthermore, for Gregory, the nature of each thing is not peculiar to that individual thing; rather, it is peculiar to each *kind* of thing, e.g. the nature of gold characterizes golden coins or the nature of man men. Gregory writes: 'their [the people's] nature is one...not divided with the individuals who participate in it' (ibid. 41.2–7 (PG 120)).

(<sup>24</sup>) Ibid. 54.1–4 (PG 132): ὥσπερ τοίνυν πολλοὶ μὲν οἱ χρύσειοι στατῆρες, χρυσὸς δὲ εἷς, οὕτω καὶ πολλοὶ μὲν οἱ καθ' ἕκαστον ἐν τῇ φύσει τοῦ ἀνθρώπου δεικνύμενοι, οἷον Πέτρος καὶ Ἰάκωβος καὶ Ἰωάννης, εἷς δὲ ἐν τούτοις ὁ ἄνθρωπος. Gregory must have believed in eternal species, like Aristotle, even if for different, theological reasons.

(<sup>25</sup>) Ibid. 40.17–21 (PG 120): πολλοὺς μὲν εἶναι τοὺς μετεσχηκότας τῆς φύσεως, φέρε εἰπεῖν μαθητὰς ἢ ἀποστόλους ἢ μάρτυρας, ἓνα δὲ ἐν πᾶσι τὸν ἄνθρωπον, εἵπερ, καθὼς εἴρηται, οὐχὶ τοῦ καθ' ἕκαστον, ἀλλὰ τοῦ κοινοῦ τῆς φύσεως ἔστιν ὁ ἄνθρωπος.

(<sup>26</sup>) In giving this reading of the text, I disagree with the mainstream scholarly view according to which Gregory would be claiming that all men (and therefore by extension the Persons of the Trinity) are instances of the same universal property. See e.g. C. Beeley, *Gregory of Nazianzus on the Trinity and the Knowledge of God: In your Light We Shall See Light* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 307: 'The relationship between an *ousia* and a *hypostasis* is thus the same as that between a form (or species, εἶδος) and an individual thing that represents that form (ἄτομον). For two or more things to be consubstantial with

one another, then, means that they are instances of the same common nature.’ Also, R. Cross, ‘Two Models of the Trinity?’, *The Heythrop Journal* 43.3 (2002): 280: ‘The Eastern view—that the divine essence is a shared universal—can be found clearly and unequivocally in Gregory of Nyssa...He claims that the divine essence is, in this respect at least, the same as any created essence...As Gregory understands such universals, they are *numerically* singular.’ My reply to this line of interpretation is that if the Persons of the Trinity were instances of a universal property, being God, the God that is one would be an abstract entity and something of different ontological status from the Persons, which as we have seen is against the doctrine. God cannot be a form, a universal, a transcendent idea, or a concept that is instantiated in concrete individual Gods or Persons. Different but also leaning on a type/token distinction is M. Barnes’s interpretation, according to which Gregory’s argument is that: ‘if it can be shown that each Person performs the same activities and the activity of the Godhead is one, then the divine nature is one’ (*Power of God*, 298). The reasoning here is very condensed. Briefly filling it in, Barnes’s idea is that for Gregory if the divine activity is one, and so the divine nature is unified, as it is instantiated in the three Persons, then there is one God in the Trinity. Along a similar line, L. Ayres (*Nicaea*, 357–8, emphasis in the original): ‘Gregory, of course, does not want to deny that the divine persons possess their own distinct and irreducible hypostatic existence. However, he uses a model of causality to present the three not as possessing distinct actions, but as together constituting *just one distinct action* (because they are one power).’ The problem is that on this reading none of the Persons of the Trinity would be God, if they instantiate the undivided divine nature jointly. (It is similar to a human hand, which jointly with the body constitute a human being; this makes the hand human, but not a human being.) As we saw, Gregory sets out in the letter to address the metaphysical challenge that each of the Persons is God, not just divine, and still, there is only one God. So Gregory wouldn’t want his argument to lead to the conclusion that follows from Ayres’ and Barnes’ position.

(<sup>27</sup>) *Ad Ablabium*, 41.2–4 (PG 120): ἡ δὲ φύσις μία ἐστίν [...] οὐκ ἀύξανόμενη διὰ προσθήκης, οὐ μειούμενη δι’ ὑφαιρέσεως.

(<sup>28</sup>) *Ibid.* 53.7–14 (PG 131–2): οὔτε μειώσεως οὔτε αὐξήσεως κατὰ τὸν ἀληθῆ λόγον προσγινομένης τῇ φύσει, ὅταν ἐν πλείοσιν ἢ ἐλάττοσι θεωρῇται. μόνα γὰρ κατὰ σύνθεσιν ἀριθμεῖται, ὅσα κατ’ ἰδίαν περιγραφὴν θεωρεῖται· ἡ δὲ περιγραφὴ ἐν ἐπιφανείᾳ σώματος καὶ μεγέθει καὶ τόπῳ καὶ τῇ διαφορᾷ τῇ κατὰ τὸ σχῆμα καὶ χρῶμα καταλαμβάνεται· τὸ δὲ ἔξω τούτων θεωρούμενον ἐκφεύγει τὴν διὰ τῶν τοιούτων περιγραφὴν.

(<sup>29</sup>) *Ibid.* 54.1–4 (PG 132): ὥσπερ τοῖνυν πολλοὶ μὲν οἱ χρύσειοι στατῆρες, χρυσὸς δὲ εἷς, οὕτω καὶ πολλοὶ μὲν οἱ καθ’ ἕκαστον ἐν τῇ φύσει τοῦ ἀνθρώπου



δεικνύμενοι, οἷον Πέτρος καὶ Ἰάκωβος καὶ Ἰωάννης, εἷς δὲ ἐν τούτοις ὁ ἄνθρωπος.

(<sup>30</sup>) This concluding comparison is particularly telling because it helps us understand a potentially misleading expression Gregory uses, namely, ‘the man in them’. Gregory does not mean the universal man in *each* man. His comparison is: ‘as then the golden staters are many, but the gold is one; [...] [men] are many, yet the man in them is one’. What Gregory is saying is that the man in all the men is one. The translation in English does not make this explicit; one may still think that ‘the man in them’ is the man in each of them. That this is not what Gregory is saying is explicit in the Greek text: εἷς δὲ ἐν τούτοις ὁ ἄνθρωπος; the man who is in them is one.

(<sup>31</sup>) Ibid. 40.17–21 (PG 120): πολλοὺς μὲν εἶναι τοὺς μετεσχηκότας τῆς φύσεως, φέρε εἰπεῖν μαθητὰς ἢ ἀποστόλους ἢ μάρτυρας, ἓνα δὲ ἐν πᾶσι τὸν ἄνθρωπον, εἴπερ, καθὼς εἴρηται, οὐχὶ τοῦ καθ’ ἕκαστον, ἀλλὰ τοῦ κοινοῦ τῆς φύσεώς ἐστιν ὁ ἄνθρωπος.

(<sup>32</sup>) Ibid. 41.2–7 (PG 120): ἡ δὲ φύσις μία ἐστίν, αὐτὴ πρὸς ἑαυτὴν ἡνωμένη καὶ ἀδιάτμητος ἀκριβῶς μονάς...ἀλλ’ ὅπερ ἐστὶν ἐν οὔσα καὶ ἐν διαμένουσα κἂν ἐν πλήθει φαίνεται, ἄσχιστος καὶ συνεχῆς καὶ ὁλόκληρος καὶ τοῖς μετέχουσιν αὐτῆς τοῖς καθ’ ἕκαστον οὐ συνδιαιρουμένη.

(<sup>33</sup>) One might speculate that Gregory is influenced in thinking of the nature of things of a kind as the fusion of the totality of things of that kind by an ontological position which is attributed to the philosopher Hippias, in Plato’s dialogue *Hippias Major*, and which appears to be one of fusions of things of the same kind:

Socrates, you don’t look at the *entireties of things* (*ta hola tōn pragmatōn*), nor do the people you’re used to talking with. You people knock away at the fine (*kalon*) and the other beings (*onta*) by taking each separately and cutting it up with words [like Gregory’s articulation of man into ‘disciples [...] apostles, martyrs’.] Because of that you don’t realise how great (*megala*) they are—*naturally continuous bodies of being* (*dianekê sōmata tēs ousias*). (301b2–7, my emphasis)

I cannot explore this thought further in this context.

(<sup>34</sup>) *Word and Object* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1960), 90.

(<sup>35</sup>) We may conjecture that Gregory may be thinking of the fusion of the human condition in nature as the fusion of *rationality* in nature, which, since Aristotle, had been the *differentia* that defined the essence of man.

(<sup>36</sup>) *Ad Ablabium*, 42.5–9 (PG 120): κύριος ὁ θεός σου κύριος εἷς ἐστι, κἂν ἡ φωνὴ τῆς θεότητος διήκη διὰ τῆς ἀγίας τριάδος. ταῦτα δὲ λέγω κατὰ τὸν ἀποδοθέντα ἡμῖν ἐπὶ τῆς ἀνθρωπίνης φύσεως λόγον, ἐν ᾧ μεμαθήκαμεν μὴ δεῖν πληθυντικῶς χαρακτηρί τὴν προσηγορίαν πλατύνειν τῆς φύσεως.

(<sup>37</sup>) *Ibid.* 54.24–55.3 (PG 132): τὴν δὲ θεὸς φωνὴν παρατετηρημένως κατὰ τὸν ἐνικὸν ἐξαγγέλλει τύπον, τοῦτο προμηθευμένη, τὸ μὴ διαφόρους φύσεις ἐπὶ τῆς θείας οὐσίας ἐν τῇ πληθυντικῇ σημασίᾳ τῶν θεῶν παρεισάγεσθαι.

(<sup>38</sup>) *Ibid.* 56.3–10 (PG 133): τὸ μὲν αἷτιον [...] εἶναι τὸ δὲ ἐκ τοῦ αἰτίου· καὶ τοῦ ἐξ αἰτίας ὄντος πάλιν ἄλλην διαφορὰν ἐννοοῦμεν· τὸ μὲν γὰρ προσεχῶς ἐκ τοῦ πρώτου, τὸ δὲ διὰ τοῦ προσεχῶς ἐκ τοῦ πρώτου, ὥστε καὶ τὸ μονογενὲς ἀναμφίβολον ἐπὶ τοῦ υἱοῦ μένειν, καὶ τὸ ἐκ τοῦ πατρὸς εἶναι τὸ πνεῦμα μὴ ἀμφιβάλλειν, τῆς τοῦ υἱοῦ μεσιτείας καὶ αὐτῷ τὸ μονογενὲς φυλαττούσης καὶ τὸ πνεῦμα τῆς φυσικῆς πρὸς τὸν πατέρα σχέσεως μὴ ἀπειργούσης.

(<sup>39</sup>) *Ibid.* 57.8–12 (PG 135–6): Ἐπειδὴ τοίνυν τὰς μὲν ὑποστάσεις ἐπὶ τῆς ἀγίας τριάδος ὁ τοῦ αἰτίου διακρίνει λόγος... ἡ δὲ θεία φύσις ἀπαράλλακτός τε καὶ ἀδιαίρετος διὰ πάσης ἐννοίας καταλαμβάνεται, διὰ τοῦτο κυρίως μία θεότης καὶ εἷς θεὸς καὶ τὰ ἄλλα πάντα τῶν θεοπρεπῶν ὀνομάτων μοναδικῶς ἐξαγγέλλεται.

(<sup>40</sup>) *Ibid.* 47.24–48.2 (PG 125): πᾶσα ἐνέργεια ἡ θεόθεν ἐπὶ τὴν κτίσιν διήκουσα... ἐκ πατρὸς ἀφορμᾶται καὶ διὰ τοῦ υἱοῦ πρόεισι καὶ ἐν τῷ πνεύματι τῷ ἁγίῳ τελειοῦται.

(<sup>41</sup>) *Ibid.* 50.15–17 (PG 128): ἀφορμάω, ἐνεργέω, and τελειόω respectively: ἐκ μὲν τοῦ πατρὸς οἶον ἐκ πηγῆς τινος ἀφορμώμενος, ὑπὸ δὲ τοῦ υἱοῦ ἐνεργούμενος, ἐν δὲ τῇ δυνάμει τοῦ πνεύματος τελειῶν τὴν χάριν.

(<sup>42</sup>) See Radde-Gallwitz's chapter in this volume, which offers a more detailed account of the three Persons' (in his words) 'distinct and non-interchangeable roles':

Although the three persons are not distinct agents (insofar as distinct agents have distinct acts), they can nonetheless be said to have distinct and non-interchangeable parts within each single act. This distinction is already signalled by Gregory's typical use of the customary prepositional markers for the three: from, through, and in. The point is not that there are three roles played by three agents, but that each act is performed by (or 'in') the Spirit and has an explanation involving the Father and the Son. We can see this by examining Gregory's reading of the language of 'performing all in all' in 1 Corinthians 12:4–11. Gregory assumes that the subject of the verb *energei* here is the Spirit. (p. 213, this volume)

(<sup>43</sup>) *Ad Ablabium*, 48.4–8 (PG 125): οὐκ ἀποτεταγμένη ἐκάστου καὶ ἰδιάζουσα ἔστιν ἡ περὶ τι σπουδή· ἀλλ’ ὅπερ ἂν γίνηται τῶν εἴτε εἰς τὴν ἡμετέραν πρόνοιαν φθανόντων εἴτε πρὸς τὴν τοῦ παντὸς οἰκονομίαν καὶ σύστασιν, διὰ τῶν τριῶν μὲν γίνεται, οὐ μὴν τρία ἔστι τὰ γινόμενα.

Some scholars have argued that the interdependence of the three Persons’ roles is what justifies God’s oneness in number. In his contribution to this volume, Radde-Gallwitz argues that for Gregory God is one and three on account of the fact that His action is (numerically) one, but composite, having three parts that are correlated with the Persons of the Trinity:

As in *Against Eunomius* 2, Gregory is interested first of all in the achievement of a divine activity and then secondly in what we can infer from any such case. As in *Against Eunomius* 2, the conditions lying behind any single divine action are the power to perform it and the intention to do so—now correlated with Son and Father, respectively, following in reverse the order of the baptismal formula. That Gregory makes this Trinitarian correlation means that, for him, what it is to say Father is in part to speak of this origination of divine action, what it is to speak of Son is in part to refer to the divine power, and what it is to name Spirit is in part to talk about God’s acting *ad extra*. (p. 213, this volume)

We encounter here the same problem we found with Barnes’s interpretation. If each of the Persons of the Trinity possesses only one component of the divine nature, whereas all three together make up the whole of the divine nature, then how can Gregory explain that each Person of the Trinity is God? As Gregory states, ‘not to acknowledge the Godhead of the Son and the Holy Spirit, [...] is impious and absurd’ (*Ad Ablabium*, 38.5–7 (PG 116–17)), hence each of the Persons is God, as we saw.

Access brought to you by: